University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design

Art, Art History and Design, School of

Summer 2009

Review of *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este.* by Stephen J. Campbell

Andrea Bolland
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, abolland1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artfacpub

 Part of the Illustration Commons, Painting Commons, and the Printmaking Commons

Bolland, Andrea, "Review of *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este.* by Stephen J. Campbell" (2009). *Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design*. 25.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artfacpub/25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art, Art History and Design, School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in Sixteenth Century Journal, vol. 40, no. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 634-636.
Copyright 2009 Sixteenth Century Journal. Used by permission.

The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este. Stephen J. Campbell. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. viii + 402 pp. $60.00. ISBN 978-0-300-11753-0.

REVIEWED BY: Andrea Bolland, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Isabella d'Este's activities as an art collector and patron are richly documented and have received a correspondingly large amount of art historical attention in the modern era. Yet Isabella—and the *studiolo* she had created and decorated in the Mantuan Palazzo Ducale—have gotten mixed reviews in this scholarship; the former has historically emerged as difficult, irrational, and acquisitive rather than discerning, while the paintings done for the latter by Andrea Mantegna, Perugino, Lorenzo Costa, and Correggio between 1497 and

1530 are often treated as curiosities—stilted in style and didactic in subject—within the larger scope of the artists' careers. The paintings have been understood as dictated by moralizing literary sources—as dry transcriptions of even dryer texts. In this version of history, Isabella is cast as "villain"—a patron neither intellectually sophisticated enough to get the best from her humanist advisors nor aesthetically savvy enough to get the best from her painters.

Stephen J. Campbell's ambitious and commendable new book, *The Cabinet of Eros,* largely redeems both paintings and patron, through a mixture of broad contextualization—both physical and cultural—and close reading, of images as well as of texts. Yet, as the ordering of subjects in the title suggests, the book's larger concern—and arguably most valuable accomplishment—is to recast our understanding of the Renaissance interest in myth itself. In a way, Campbell builds on the early twentieth-century work of Aby Warburg, who investigated the psychological dimensions of Renaissance fascination with pagan myth. For Campbell, Isabella's paintings are notable not simply as displays of erudition, but as mythic explorations of the psychic realities of an erudite Renaissance audience.

The *studiolo* that emerges in *The Cabinet of Eros* is a complex space whose paintings thematize in various ways the activity of study itself, as well as the broader activity of psychic self-cultivation that it entails. Unlike many previous commentators, Campbell takes Isabella's intellectual ambitions seriously, paying close attention to the texts she owned (an appendix helpfully reconstructs the contents of her library) and to the ideas important to the circle of writers and humanists associated with her, most notably Mario Equicola. The book proceeds on the reasonable assumption that published texts are often the outcome of a lively intellectual culture rather than its origin; thus the *studiolo's* paintings (which occasionally precede the publication of the works in which he finds keys to their meaning) are themselves tangible expressions of, or meditations on these ideas—for example, the relations between love, poetry, nature, and art—to the same degree that the texts are. The *studiolo* is, in essence, a space enlivened by paintings, which—like books—stimulate as well as reflect thought and debate.

After a thoughtful and wide-ranging historiographical introduction, the main body of the text is divided into two large sections. Part 1, "The Studiolo and Its Histories," consists of a series of essaylike chapters on topics—collecting, cultivation of self, the gendered space of the *studiolo,* the Renaissance understanding of Eros—that lay the historical and methodological foundations for Campbell's analysis of the *studiolo* paintings. Within these chapters the *studiolo* itself advances and recedes, and Campbell seems to presume a certain amount of familiarity from his reader on the project, its patron, and the works that adorned it (the history of Isabella's project is not really laid out until page 61). Of course, straightforward histories of the project are easy to find elsewhere, and these chapters offer a rich contextualization for the *studiolo* and for Isabella's activities as patron and collector, drawing on—and to some degree reconciling the claims of—both intellectual history and material culture studies.

Part 2, "The Paintings," consists of six chapters dedicated to the seven paintings that decorated the space. Correggio's two paintings—traditionally read as allegories of virtue and of vice, and here convincingly retitled *Allegory of the Passions* and *Allegory of Philosophy*—are treated together in one chapter that lays out the personal, historical, and artistic changes in Isabella's world during the twenty-year period that separates them from the earlier commissions. In a concluding chapter, Campbell sketches the implications of his study for later sixteenth-century mythological painting. A balance is maintained between reading the images as unique and complex "texts" produced by a variety of artists over the course of three decades, and understanding their roles in articulating a larger theme: the necessity of

controlling internally and externally imposed perturbations and passions that threaten the integrity of the self. The iconographic interpretations in these chapters, in keeping with the nature of the imagery they analyze, can be complex edifices. One might disagree with the reading of individual motifs—or even individual paintings—yet the overall reading and, moreover, the model for analysis are sound; instead of locating meaning in a static text that lies beyond the surface of the painting, Campbell places it in the dynamic realm *before* that surface—it is generated by the interaction of viewers with the works, with texts, and with each other. In a book that relies on close readings of complex images, one occasionally wishes for better reproductions or more details (most notably for Costa's painting of *Comus*). The book concludes with a useful appendix by noted scholar of the Mantuan archives, Clifford M. Brown, containing a twenty-one-page digest of the correspondence concerning the *studiolo* in its original location in the Castello San Giorgio.

1969 SCJ 2009